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SUBJECT: DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS: ONE  
GENERAL'S VIEW OF BURMA'S ETHNIC GROUPS

REF: RANGOON 131

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: While spending ten days in remote Shan State with a senior military intelligence officer during the annual USG-Burma opium yield survey, we were constantly told that Prime Minister Khin Nyunt has undertaken a full-court press to implement his "road map" to democracy. This focus has interesting implications for General Khin Nyunt's subordinates, who now carry much of the water on his regular duties, including relations with Burma's ethnic groups. Our principal interlocutor on the survey, Brigadier General Kyaw Thein, underscored the political challenges of dealing with the country's diverse ethnic groups and we observed him interact with leaders of cease-fire groups ranging from SPDC "vassals" to former adversaries who now enjoy considerable autonomy. One measure of the SPDC's influence in the ethnic areas of Shan State is the manner in which each ethnic group treats poppy cultivation. For some, it is a fading extracurricular activity, while for others it is a way of life. End Summary.

General Kyaw Thein

12. (C) Our recent USG-Burma joint opium yield survey, conducted throughout remote locations in Shan State March 3-12, gave us an extended opportunity to exchange views with Brigadier General Kyaw Thein, leader of the Burmese survey team and a senior official in the Office of the Chief of Military Intelligence (OCMI). Gen. Kyaw Thein had oversight of the entire Burmese portion of the opium survey, which involved months of preparation, several Burmese military aircraft, dozens of extremely remote survey sites, and hundreds of military and government personnel.

13. (C) Kyaw Thein, who reports directly to deputy OCMI chief General Kyaw Win and OCMI chief (and Prime Minister) General Khin Nyunt, has long held the regime's lead on narcotics issues, including oversight of the Central Committee for Drugs Abuse Control (CCDAC), the GOB's principal counternarcotics unit housed at the Ministry of Home Affairs and staffed by police and military intelligence officers. Kyaw Thein's working title is Chief of the OCMI Internal Relations Division (IRD), within the military intelligence directorate.

Life Under the Road Map

14. (C) Kyaw Thein confided to us that he and several of his colleagues have picked up additional duties following the appointment of his senior boss, Khin Nyunt, to the Prime Minister position in August 2003. Contrary to general speculation, he said, Khin Nyunt did not, and will not, lose his existing military intelligence and ethnic relations portfolios, nor did he simply take on ceremonial duties as Prime Minister. Rather, General Khin Nyunt had taken on an array of new responsibilities as head of government, yet counted on his subordinates to carry much of the weight of his existing "work requirements."

15. (C) As a result of Khin Nyunt's promotion, according to Kyaw Thein, the deputy chief of OCMI (Kyaw Win) has subsequently shouldered much of the burden for managing the day to day operations of the SPDC's vast military intelligence apparatus. Meanwhile, Kyaw Thein and several other officers have taken on responsibility for managing many of the regime's relations with Burma's ethnics, including the coddling of cease-fire groups and courting of insurgent hold-outs.

16. (C) BGen Kyaw Thein, who indicated that he relished the opportunity to spend ten days in the field and away from the burdens of his office, said that under the direction of PM Khin Nyunt, life for senior OCMI officials had become "the road map, all day and every day." Khin Nyunt is keen to implement initial steps in the road map plan as early as possible and, particularly for Kyaw Thein, oversight of counternarcotics activities had become a secondary priority in recent months.

## A Convention Cast of Thousands?

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17. (C) Kyaw Thein offered his view that despite the full-court press on implementing the road map, reconvening the National Convention would not take place before at least the end of June. He said the regime was finding it a challenge to accommodate all of the ethnic groups, particularly those who had reached cease-fire arrangements with the SPDC since the last ill-fated National Convention, which lasted from 1993 until 1996 (Note: approximately 15 armed ethnic opposition groups and splinter organizations have made peace with the SPDC since 1993. End note). The SPDC, said Kyaw Thein, anticipated a vast increase in the number of delegates participating in a new Convention, perhaps as many as double or triple the 700-plus who participated in 1993.

18. (C) Regarding discussions involving a National Convention and a new constitution, Kyaw Thein said the regime had to approach each ethnic organization as a unique entity, as every ethnic grouping had its own distinct "personality" and identity. As an example, he noted that during the peak of insurgent conflicts in the 1980s, the Burmese Army categorized the major armed ethnic groups by their favored battle tactics: the Wa preferred full frontal assaults, the Karen favored ambushes, the Kachin used snipers, and the Chin were well known for digging in and holding solid defensive positions.

## Friends, Former Foes, and Those In Between

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19. (C) During our opium survey travels, we encountered numerous cease-fire groups and observed Kyaw Thein take a slightly different approach with each. He was clearly most at ease with the so-called "vassal" groups, ethnic entities which were among the first to cut mutually beneficial deals with the SPDC in the late 1980s and early 1990s such as the Pa-O National Organization (Special Region 6), the Kokang (Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army-MNDAA, Special Regional 1), and the Kachin Defense Army-KDA (Special Region 5). Kyaw Thein was also at home among the residents of a unique tri-village region known as "Lon-Htan" in northern Shan State, where locals gave early support to the Burmese Army against the Burmese Communist Party and were rewarded with limited autonomy, including the right to run their own people's militia.

110. (C) Kyaw Thein's relations were less relaxed with the more aggressive leaders of the Shan State Army-SSA (Special Region 3) and the United Wa State Army-UWSA (Special Region 2). These cease-fire groups occupy the largest of Burma's dozen-plus special regions and arguably have the greatest autonomy. However, in exchange for self-rule, many observers believe these regions have received little in terms of assistance from the GOB and consequently continue to tolerate and "tax" the drug business as a means of procuring development funds. Kyaw Thein's last field command, before his promotion to HQ positions in Rangoon, was on the front lines against the UWSA.

## It's My Poppy and I'll Grow If I Want To

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111. (C) We visited several Shan and Wa villages where local leaders were particularly defiant about their poppy livelihoods. In one Shan village under SSA control, farmers said they had no knowledge of the illegality of growing poppy and declared that they would continue to produce opium for the foreseeable future as their only source of supplemental cash income. Kyaw Thein conceded that in many parts of Shan State fully under central authority, the GOB had low expectations for weaning "hold out" farmers off of poppy and did not expect substantial progress until the GOB's goal of becoming poppy-free in 2014.

112. (C) Wa territory is a different story, however. UWSA authorities have declared a deadline of 2005 for ceasing the cultivation of poppy, but not all Wa villages are on board with this objective and several local leaders took advantage of Kyaw Thein's presence, as well as the rest of our joint survey team, to declare their own intentions.

113. (C) One example of local Wa defiance was the village of Yaung Luhk, located in close proximity to the border with China, where the entire population of 113 families cultivates poppy and farmers fetch over \$300 per kilo of opium, almost three times the average market price in the interior of Shan State. The local UWSA chairman belligerently declared to Kyaw Thein, in our presence, that he and his villagers were fully aware of the 2005 deadline but had no intention of stopping poppy cultivation unless the Burmese and the international community provided them with cash assistance. In another Wa village we met up with Pao Yu Lian, younger brother of UWSA Chairman Pao Yu Xiang, who encouraged local

leaders to press General Kyaw Thein for assistance in exchange for ceasing poppy cultivation.

Comment: An Uneasy Peace

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14. (C) The GOB has, since the augmentation of our bilateral sanctions in July 2003, instituted a de facto non-fraternization policy that prohibits most Burmese military and civilian officials from unauthorized contact with U.S. diplomats. Spending ten days in remote Shan State with Brigadier General Kyaw Thein was a rare opportunity to observe a senior military officer interact with foreign diplomats, subordinates, local officials, and especially diverse ethnic groups. Although he enjoyed the basic perks of a one-star general, he was friendly and professional with the ethnic groups and we did not see him exact a "visit tax" like other senior officials we have observed in the field (reftel).

15. (C) We took particular note in the hearty laughs he shared with leaders of ethnic groups in the SPDC camp, including a friendly exchange with KDA officials who pitched him on revisiting the terms of their 1991 cease-fire agreement to broaden their share of jade mining concessions. As for relations with the Wa, it has been 15 years since the UWSA reached a cease-fire with the GOB. However, it was abundantly clear during our survey that, at best, an uneasy peace exists between the two sides and Kyaw Thein was merely a guest while in Wa territory. He appeared embarrassed by our encounters with defiant Wa poppy growers, and privately acknowledged that UWSA authorities will have a difficult time meeting their 2005 poppy-free deadline. End Comment.  
Martinez